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The Interpretation of Prehistoric Anthropomorphic Figurines

PETER J. UCKO

SINCE THE EARLY PART OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY much has been written on the significance of the human figurines found in many prehistoric sites. These have mostly been interpreted in terms of a Mother Goddess ideology and have always been considered of great importance because they alone have been recognized as giving direct evidence concerning prehistoric religions. Such discussions come generally in three main contexts: most commonly within all-embracing surveys of the prehistoric field (e.g. Renaud 1929; James 1959; Hawkes 1961); often as part of archaeological reports on specific sites (e.g. Pumpelly 1904; Mylonas 1929 and 1959); rarely as part of detailed typological and chronological examinations of figurines themselves from specific sites or areas (e.g. Dumitrescu 1932–3; Hutchinson 1938). In the numerous specialized statements concerning prehistoric figurines many important points have been raised but hardly any of them have been incorporated as a whole into the general literature referred to above with the result that, as will be seen below, the general Mother Goddess interpretation fails to cover all the known facts.

The aim of this paper is to bring isolated strands of argument together and to suggest that a possible line for the interpretation of these prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines should be the investigation not only of their significance as a question in itself, but also of the way in which they were used. No typological or stylistic classification will therefore be attempted here. Few of the theoretical considerations which will be brought forward will be entirely original for, somewhere or other, parts of each argument at least, will have been made already. Nor is this the place for a full bibliography concerning all the theoretical points, and names will be mentioned only when they are of particular importance for a specific line of enquiry.

There are four possible main lines of enquiry in trying to interpret prehistoric figurines: (1) the detailed examination of the figurines themselves; (2) the archaeological context of the figurines; (3) later historical evidence from the area concerned; (4) relevant anthropological evidence. Previous discussions regarding the interpretation of these figurines have mainly started from an assumed historical tradition (3), while a few have also considered the archaeological context (2). The very few detailed examinations of the figurines themselves (1) have been far from comprehensive, while the relevant anthropological data (4) have been almost totally ignored, except for the figurines from the New World.[1]

In this study, the detailed archaeological evidence will be taken from the neolithic figurines from Crete, with comparisons drawn from pre-dynastic Egypt and other roughly contemporaneous non-literate agricultural societies. Crete has been chosen

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simply for reasons of convenience: the number of figurines is manageable; the literature on them is not too vast; and the figurines form a compact whole. In terms of method, however, the figurines from Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Aegean could equally well have been used. An examination of such material must start by investigating each group of figurines as a whole and conclusions derived from one site or country can be applied to other figurines only where the material itself warrants such a transference. Therefore, any specific conclusions arrived at will be directly relevant only to neolithic Crete, although the general Mother Goddess interpretation will often be referred to and discussed. The common practice of jumping from Bronze Age European figurines to Palaeolithic Venuses and back again to neolithic material is in itself unscientific, for the figurines must be viewed against their economic and social backgrounds. Any assumption regarding the desirability of numerous children, for example, in an agricultural (neolithic) society may well be quite mistaken for a hunting (palaeolithic) society.[2]

The original publications of the Cretan figurines continued the interpretative tradition of a cult of the Mother Goddess, and the figurines were taken either as images of the goddess herself or as amulets connected with her (Evans 1921).[3] The existence of a Mother Goddess has been accepted and discussed since the eighteenth century (as well as in classical times) when, as the receptive Earth, she was considered the natural partner of the male, procreative Sky. The twentieth century's estimation of the prehistoric Mother Goddess has left her character largely undefined. Her association with the Earth, with Maternity, and with Fertility is usually assumed, although the nature of the association is rarely specified. Most commonly the Mother Goddess is simply taken as symbolizing fertility, although the actual nature of the fertility varies from a general all-embracing fertility of animals, humans, and vegetation to a specifically human fertility. This traditional interpretation has been followed by most authors (e.g. Renaud 1929; James 1959; Hawkes 1961) except those dealing with specific archaeological questions, who were not concerned with interpretation (e.g. Weinberg 1951), and those who had definite 'heretical' ideas on the questions of the significance of figurines in general (e.g. Hogarth 1927; Myres 1930).

The published neolithic anthropomorphic figurines from Crete come from the excavations by Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos;[4] from the excavation by Pernier at Phaistos;[5] from an unexcavated site called Kato Ierapetra;[6] from the excavation by Levi at Phaistos;[7] and from the excavations by Professor J. D. Evans at Knossos.[8]

Turning to the first line of enquiry there is the problem of the figurines themselves. No comprehensive survey of the Cretan neolithic figurines exists, although Hutchinson classified the published Knossos figurines together with the unstratified examples which were then in the Stratigraphical Museum at Knossos (Hutchinson 1938). Each Phaistos publication consisted simply of photograph and short description, and the figurines themselves come from only a vaguely neolithic context; the Knossos publications consisted of drawings or photographs, short descriptions, simple typology, and parallels drawn with Near Eastern material; the Kato Ierapetra figurine was described fully with photographs of all aspects and was classified with other figurines on the basis of its crossed legs. Although Weinberg considers the fabric typical of the Middle Neolithic (Weinberg 1951), it is impossible to date it by the ware alone[9] and, in addition, it is

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both a surface find and atypical for the Neolithic in posture, detail, and composition. These publications of the neolithic figurines from Crete have not exhausted the number of figurines which were found, and the resulting picture of the neolithic figurines from Crete is therefore unrepresentative. The publications by Evans, Hutchinson, and Weinberg still leave twenty-six figurines from Knossos unpublished.[10] A further thirty-seven neolithic figurines are now known from Professor J. D. Evans's recent excavations at Knossos.

Because of the uncertain nature of the dating, the Phaistos, Kato Ierapetra, and the unstratified Knossos figurines will not be used in the present analysis. It is worth remembering that the evidence for the supposed Cretan neolithic Mother Goddess is in fact known almost exclusively from this partial material from Knossos, which may itself not be representative for the rest of Crete.

An analysis of the stratified neolithic Knossos figurines in terms of interpretation as opposed simply to typological classification, leads to the following results:

(*a*) Six figurines are evidently male (i.e. have penis, Fig. 1: 1 [35]); thirty-three are female (i.e. have breasts, Fig. 1: 2 [14], 3 [63]); forty-two figurines are sexless (i.e. have neither breasts nor penis, Fig. 1: 4 [62]). This proportion between the sexes as well as the existence of the sexless group, has generally been overlooked or lost within the statement that the female figurines far outnumber the males. A group of sexless figurines in fact exists among other groups of neolithic and chalcolithic figurines from other countries (Fig. 2: 6 [17], 9 [5], 7, 8 [4]), and has also been disregarded.

(*b*) Seventy-three figurines are made of clay; twenty-six of various stones; two of shell; and one of bone.

(*c*) The average height of the figurines is about two inches.

(*d*) While the whole complement of Cretan figurines can be classified according to a combination of two sets of three variables—sit (Fig. 1: 6 [95]), squat (Fig. 1: 2 [14]), stand (Fig. 1: 7 [23], 10, 11 [47]); and arm-stumps (Fig. 1: 2 [14], 7 [23]), arms-to-chest (Fig. 1: 9 [29], 10 [47], 6 [95]; Fig. 2: 1 [69]), no arms (Fig. 1: 5 [37]); there is a great variety of forms, shapes, and combinations within this framework. Such variety of details in combination with a generally comprehensive cultural (stylistic?) framework, is also found among pre-dynastic Egyptian figurines.

(*e*) The figurines vary considerably in their technical excellence (Fig. 1: 10, 11 [47]; Fig. 2: 1 [69]). This also is true for Egyptian figurines (Fig. 3: 1 [1], 2 [28]).

(*f*) Several of the figurines show certain anatomical features such as backbone (Fig. 1: 11 [47]), navel, (Fig. 1: 6 [95]) and, rarely, facial features (Fig. 2: 2 [7]). Some also have incised clothes or tattoo marks (Fig. 1: 7 [23], 8 [25]). Occasionally anatomical and decorative details are also shown on Egyptian figurines (Fig. 2: 7, 8 [4], 10–12 [102]).

Correlations between the various chronological subdivisions of the Cretan neolithic and isolated features such as materials used for the manufacture of the figurines, their postures, and the anatomical and decorative details shown on them, are singularly lacking. About seventy per cent of the figurines in each period are made of clay, while marble[11] is the second most commonly used material in all periods. There is no development from the squatting or seated to the standing figures, or in the respective numbers of these postures, from one period to another. Male, female, and sexless figures are f ound

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in all periods and all are shown with similar anatomical or decorative details irrespective of the period concerned.

Only the arm-positions of the figurines are somehow connected with the chronological periods. Although arm- or shoulder-stumps, arms bent on to the chest, or no arms at all are found contemporaneously, the former are shown on eighty-eight per cent of the Early Neolithic figurines while arms bent on to the chest are shown on only five per cent of these Early figurines. In the Middle Neolithic period the proportions are slightly closer, sixty-five per cent as compared to thirty-two per cent. In the Late Neolithic period, however, arms bent on to the chest are as common as arm- or shoulder-stumps, forty eight per cent as compared to forty-six per cent.

Turning now to the archaeological context (2), several authors have stressed the difference between the contexts of the Cretan and the Egyptian figurines (Hutchinson 1938). The former are said to come from habitation sites and the latter from tombs. Not only is this probably a mistaken antithesis from the point of view of interpretation but it also misses another important factor. For no neolithic tombs are known from Crete,[12] and it is therefore a purely negative argument to assume that they would not be in such tombs, did they exist; on the other hand, settlement sites as opposed to cemeteries have been rarely excavated in pre-dynastic Egypt, but at least two such settlements have produced figurines (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928; Brunton 1937). That the Egyptian figurines are found in tombs, and in comparatively few tombs at that, may well be less significant than their position in the tombs, the numbers found together in tombs, their association with particularly rich or poor tombs, and their association with a particular age or sex of a skeleton. In the present state of our knowledge significant correlations are lacking except in Nubia (Firth 1912), where the figurines appear to be associated with the tombs of children and were placed outside the tombs. However, none of these considerations applies to Crete; what is significant is that of the one hundred and two figurines, only two have come from inside houses, while all the others whose exact provenance is known (all those from the recent excavations at Knossos), come from outside the walls of houses in general habitation debris or apparent rubbish pits. Although no cult buildings are known from neolithic Crete, it is worth noting that no figurines from Crete come from any building which might be considered a shrine,[13] and that a building cannot be assumed to have ritual or cult significance simply on the basis of an associated figurine, unless its ritual character is established in some other way.[14]

This is all the direct evidence that can be derived from the archaeological material itself, and at this point a summary can profitably be made to show what facts must be explained by any hypothesis concerning the interpretation of these figurines.

Male, female, and apparently sexless figurines have been found mainly outside houses and in rubbish pits, though they do also occur inside houses. They are made of different materials though most commonly of clay. They show marked differences in quality, in artistic merit, and anatomical detail, although they all appear to conform to certain 'stylistic' conventions.

Turning to the generally accepted interpretation of these figurines as representations of the Mother Goddess, several of the facts have been incorporated into the interpretation, while others have not. Male figurines have been treated as exceptions and the

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sexless group have been taken as females. No attempt has been made in connexion with the Cretan Mother Goddess, at least, to explain the occurrence of two groups of supposedly female figurines, those with and without breasts. It can not be finally decided whether these sexless figurines represent males, females, or immature children (or something more abstract like 'humanity'[15]); the neolithic Cretans possibly looked at their men and women in quite a different way from to-day.[16] The secondary sexual female characteristic—swelling of the hips—does not give the answer to this question, for the proportion of the hips to the waist of the sitting males is larger than that of the sitting females; while the proportion is reversed between the standing males and the standing females. That the neolithic Cretans could and did make figurines with breasts or penis shows that those with neither must either have had some special significance for the neolithic Cretans, or must be able to give the modern investigator some valuable indication as to their correct interpretation, but the Mother Goddess interpretation offers no explanation for the existence of three different groups of figurines.

The presence of the figurines in occupational debris has been taken as evidence against their being interpreted as 'shabtis' and also as evidence of the Mother Goddess's domestic nature (Hutchinson 1938), but no explanation for their prevalence outside houses is offered by the Mother Goddess interpretation, nor for their generally non-ritual context. The predominant use of the cheapest material, clay, for their manufacture is obscure if they represent the Mother Goddess (unless some association between the Mother Goddess, the Earth, and the use of clay, is assumed); so, too, is the variety of types of human figurine. Differences in technical quality do not enter into any discussion of these figurines in terms of the Mother Goddess. Furthermore an important argument in favour of a Fertility Goddess has been the supposedly exaggerated overt sexual characteristics shown on the figurines, combined with the position of the arms which supposedly foreshadowed a later historical symbolic position. As has been shown, overt sexual characteristics are noticeable more by their absence than by their presence, and the symbolic posture—by which is usually meant the hands cupping the breasts—is, as pointed out by Hutchinson, totally absent both from the neolithic Cretan figurines (Hutchinson 1938) and those Egyptian figurines which come from excavations and were not bought.

It is noticeable in this context that figurines which have more than simple arm-stumps, have their arms bent on to the chest, irrespective of their sex, and in the case of the females, their arms are either far below the breasts (Fig. 1: 6 [95]), or stop well to the side of the breasts (Fig. 1: 8 [25]). Furthermore, as pointed out above, the change in arm-position from one period of the Neolithic to another further supports the likelihood of this being a question of stylistic convention rather than a change in symbolic meaning.

Although this paper does not specifically deal with animal figurines, it is noticeable that the Mother Goddess interpretation makes a significant distinction between the animal and the human figurines. Just as the male figurines are rejected as a Male God of prowess, so the animals are not taken as representations of animal deities, although they are sometimes loosely tied in with an undefined general concept of fertility.

It can be seen therefore that the Mother Goddess explanation leaves several features of the total picture presented by the figurines wholly unexplained. It is very possible

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that the undefined character of the Mother Goddess herself has played a large part in the acceptance of such an interpretation of the figurines. At the same time several basic assumptions, that have little to support them in terms of direct archaeological evidence, have been made in terms of the Mother Goddess.

The most important of these is that concerning the homogeneity of the figurine material from all over the prehistoric world. Not only are all the Cretan figurines taken as representing the same deity, but also all the Aegean, Near Eastern, and Egyptian figurines are taken as corroborative evidence of such a deity. The archaeological material itself does not appear to justify such a procedure.

The second assumption which treats the female, and also the sexless, figurines as representations of a deity, as opposed to the animal or male figurines, also gains no support from the archaeological context nor from the stylistic evaluation of the figurines. In fact there are no recognizable signs of divinity about any of them, no head-dresses and no association with shrines.

A further assumption behind the ritual interpretation of these figurines, is the supposed Egyptian tomb-figurine association which has been transferred to all figurines in general. However, against this ritual interpretation, it is necessary to remember the rarity of Egyptian tombs with figurines, roughly forty-four tombs out of six thousand, the association with childrens' graves in Nubia, the position of the figurines packed into boxes or lying around broken within the tombs, and the fact that they are also found in settlements. Indeed, it is only the Ubaid figurines from Ur and Eridu which elsewhere come from graves; these are of a distinct type and could be claimed to have a distinct function (although they also are found in settlements (Wooley 1956)). At all events the archaeological evidence gives no indication that it is legitimate to transfer the interpretation from one country to another.

Turning now to the historical tradition ((3) above), the starting point of much of the Mother Goddess interpretation is reached. Much has been written in terms of the Cretan figurines as prototypes of the historical Mesopotamian Mother Goddess, Astarte. This interpretation, moving from historic to prehistoric material, may be important and legitimate for the Mesopotamian figurines, but it is hardly relevant either for Crete, the Aegean, or Egypt. The supposition regarding the widespread existence of a prehistoric Mother Goddess, characteristically somehow associated with the deification of the Earth, and foreshadowing a later historical Mother Goddess has been largely accepted in the type of general literature referred to above, and has been rarely questioned in terms of specific countries. This ignores an important point insisted upon by Frankfort that, in historic Egypt, the Earth was always a male deity (Frankfort 1958). In addition, the historic female deities of Egypt, though Mother Goddesses in the strict sense of the word, were not goddesses of fertility in the sense usually accepted for prehistoric figurines, nor comparable to the Mother Goddesses of historic Mesopotamia.

Within Crete the evidence is still more scanty. Not only is it obvious, as pointed out by several authors (e.g. Neustupny 1956; Griffiths 1958), that the further back into prehistory an investigation leads, the less relevant become later historical analogies; but while for Egypt the scene at the time of the Archaic Period can to some extent be evaluated, historic evidence relevant to a religious interpretation of the Cretan Neolithic is missing.[17]

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It is necessary to note two alternative theories occasionally put forward by archaeologists regarding the general interpretation of prehistoric figurines.

The first, quite evidently derived from analogy with historic Egypt, has been applied to figurines from other parts of the world. This is that the figurines served the same purpose as the historic 'shabti' figures of Egypt (Hogarth 1927; Myres 1930). For Egypt, with such an historical tradition, this interpretation may have some value as a starting-point for further investigation,[18] but in the case of Crete and other countries there is little to recommend it. Furthermore, the archaeological contexts of the figurines of Crete, of Nubia, and of those from the habitation sites in Egypt do not support such a general interpretation. Moreover, many of the objections raised in the discussion of the Mother Goddess theory above are no less apposite here. Hogarth's theory was one of the few which attempted to explain the occurrence of the sexless group of figurines, but he did so by recognizing two main types of figurines: those normal figurines with overt sexual characteristics, and those obese figures without, both of which, however, he considered female. This interpretation failed to consider the other stylistic differences between the two groups, and it suggested an antithesis between the overt sexual characteristics and obesity or steatopygia, taking the last two conditions as diagnostic of sexual attraction. This antithesis holds good neither for Crete nor for Egypt, although Hogarth's identification of obesity with the squatting position as an alternative explanation for the apparent steatopygia is still valuable. For Egypt itself this 'shabti' interpretation (as perhaps for the Ubaid figurines from Ur) has several interesting possibilities, provided that the assumption is made that the figurines from settlement sites were ultimately intended for the tomb. It would be necessary to be sure of the correlation between the sex of the figurine and the sex of the skeleton before any conclusions could be reached on this point, for Hogarth himself insisted on the sexual duties of the obese or steatopygous type, as well as the social duties of the normal type, that the figurines would have to fulfill.

Such an opposition, as pointed out above, between the sex of the skeleton and the figurine does not hold good for figurines from Egypt. Several features such as the relative rarity of the figurines in tombs, the unequal number of figurines in tombs (which is not correlated with the general richness of the grave goods), and the existence of animal figurines, also remain unexplained, in most cases at least, by this interpretation.

Next, the interpretation of the figurines as childrens' dolls must be considered, as it has been favoured by several archaeologists but almost exclusively with reference to the animal figurines (e.g. Pumpelly 1904; Kenyon 1956). The distinction thus made between the animal and the human figurines, found in identical contexts, is unwarranted.

As always, the archaeological context of the figurines is all-important; the association between the figurines and the childrens' tombs in Nubia appears to bear out a doll interpretation, but this association is peculiar to Nubia. Elsewhere the cheap material used for the manufacture of these figurines is readily explicable in terms of their use as dolls, and the Tsangli figurine which rattles (Fig. 4), is highly corroborative. Another feature in favour of such an interpretation is the sexless group of figurines. The existence of a group of sexless figures as well as the predominance of overtly female over overtly male figures, is well documented from 'modern' doll manufacturers,[19] though the figurines with male organs are out of place within the context of the 'modern' dolls.

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Again, the navel, one of the few anatomical features shown on the prehistoric figurines, is often shown on childrens' dolls as it is on pictures and models made by children themselves. However the immense number of figurines from Crete and elsewhere, found in debris and rubbish dumps as opposed to houses, is as inexplicable from the point of view of their interpretation as dolls, as are the figurines found in the tombs of adults in Egypt.

Anthropological evidence ((4) above) is vital for prehistoric studies not so much for typological parallels, but because it alone can give an indication of the range of practices that people living in the remote time of prehistory may have had. As the historical tradition of a country, where it is available, may give a starting-point for the investigation and the interpretation of prehistoric material, so the practices found among non-literate living peoples may present analogies to the archaeological material and thereby also provide a starting-point for interpretation.

It is interesting therefore to look for the presence of small figurines and their subsequent use and disposal among non-literate tribes. If an analogous situation is found, this does not necessarily imply the same reason for their use in prehistoric times, but it may suggest the type of explanations that the archaeologist should consider; for as has been seen above, several peculiar features are left unexplained by the Mother Goddess interpretation, at least.

It may be questioned whether it is legitimate to make use of parallels between cultures so widely separated in time and space, especially in view of the above strictures concerning the conclusions and statements, deduced on the basis of only one group of figurines and referred to all figurines in general within the prehistoric field. The situation, here, however, is quite different, for parallels are being sought between objects specifically with regard to such features as size, type, and material, with particular regard to their contexts during and after use, simply to survey the range of purposes which may lie behind the manufacture and use of such figurines. It is on the basis of these same considerations that the legitimacy of comparisons and parallels drawn between the figurines of Crete and Egypt, for example, must be decided. Specific anthropological evidence from a society with a given type of economy may be relevant to specific archaeological material from a society with a similar economic orientation.

Anthropological data provide numerous examples of children who themselves model their own human and animal toys out of clay (e.g. Fewkes 1923; Fortes 1938; Evans-Pritchard 1939). Many of the archaeological figurines could be accounted for as toys and, as such, the variation of types within a certain stylistic convention would be understandable. In general terms, however, the surprising rarity of these figurines from within houses suggests that another partial explanation may be needed. It is interesting here to note that a feature of many of the figurines, which has up to now been treated simply in terms of typological classification—the arm- or shoulder-stumps—finds a significant parallel and possible explanation in dolls among such tribes as the Ashanti which have their arms formed into simple stumps to reduce the likelihood of breakage when carried around by children (Himmelheber 1960).

Since the uses to which small clay figurines are put among tribal societies are very diverse, and though reasons for making them cannot be assumed to be the same as any one of these for the archaeological material, this diversity of use does point to what is

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probably a weakness in the archaeological interpretations, namely the assumption that a single explanation suffices to account for all the prehistoric figurines. This is dangerous with regard to the inter-country comparisons (see above) but may well be equally so for the figurines of one specific country or culture.

Cory[20] has documented and drawn attention to a most interesting and apparently quite widespread use of small clay figurines in certain parts of Africa during initiation rites (Cory 1947; 1948; 1951; 1961). Such clay figurines were used purely and simply for instruction. A pregnant female figure (Fig. 5) would be shown to a girl at initiation with the simple remark that someone resembling this figure has reached the time for birth; or such a figure would be shown with the advice that a pregnant woman should not dawdle on the way to market for in her condition she is especially liable to be affected by witchcraft. Other figurines are made to show the correct positions for holding a baby, for sexual intercourse, and so on. Figurines are also made to act as illustrations for specific tales while others copy the physical peculiarities or deformities of members of the community concerned, in order to add weight to a particular anecdote. Such purposes behind the prehistoric figurines might well explain some peculiar examples such as the apparently corpulent hunchback figurine from Knossos (Fig. 2: 3, 4, 5 [28]) and the excessively corpulent individuals which appear strikingly out of place in the context of a Mother Goddess, as well as those with male organs which do not fit convincingly into either the Mother Goddess or the doll interpretations. Those figurines which obviously portray pregnancy, and those of mother and child which occur among the figurines of Greece and Mesopotamia, for example, might also have some such reasoning behind their manufacture. The African initiation figures are highly relevant in other ways also, for they, too, vary much in technical excellence and in the numbers concerned, for both these features depend entirely on the standing of the parents of the child who is about to undergo initiation. Cory also makes it quite plain that these figures are thrown away after use, having been kept for some time in the corner of the initiation hut.

Anthropological reports include some instances of figurines in tombs. These never appear to be deities, or the symbolic representations of such deities—and in fact the very idea of a pure fertility goddess, as opposed to a protective goddess, buried with the dead in the tomb, needs further investigation—but are figurines made and buried for quite specific and practical reasons. The Yoruba, for instance, who have a great fear of witches and sorcerers, would rarely willingly admit the presence of either in their own family, and at the death of a father who happened to be a sorcerer, the son either secretly threw away the small clay 'human' figurine or buried it with his father's other more personal goods in his father's grave, lest harbouring the 'sorcerer's most dreaded agent', which in any case would be dangerous if inexpertly used, would convict the whole family of being connected with sorcery (Morton-Williams 1960 and personal communication). Other reasons for the burial of figures in the tomb can be found in the anthropological literature: commemorative figures buried in the owner's tomb, a double image figure buried at the deceased's second burial when the spirit no longer needs a place to which to return, and so on (Himmelheber 1960).

Finally there are reports of the use of small figurines as vehicles for sympathetic magic, which are best documented in the American Indian material.[21] A small figurine is carried and nursed by a woman who desires a baby. The sex of the baby desired is

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apparently specified on the figurine and presents a difficulty in so interpreting all the prehistoric figurines, unless the sexless figurines represent males, unless girls were much preferred to boys, or unless the assumption is made that the neolithic Cretans were satisfied in wishing for a child without specifying the sex desired. None of these alternatives, however, is satisfactory without some explanation of the apparent dichotomy between those with penis or breasts and those with no sexual characteristics. It seems that in some American Indian examples at least the successful mother cherished her figurine throughout the rest of her life, while in other cases the figurines were thrown out on the rubbish pit. It is interesting to note that typologically the Pomo dolls made by the children and for the children differed in no way from these magical figurines (Loeb 1926), and this is true also for analogous practices in Africa. Therefore the only way to distinguish and recognize these two functions of prehistoric figurines, if applicable to prehistory, would be by their archaeological context and not by their appearance and the usual archaeological classification by type and posture.

It is now necessary to see if any conclusions can be reached with regard to these prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines, for as has been seen above, even such an ill-defined and generalized concept as that of the Mother Goddess (see criticisms by Nilsson 1950) leaves several significant details regarding the figurines themselves and their archaeological contexts unexplained. From the considerations above it seems to be necessary to interpret each figurine, and each group of figurines, in their own right and to avoid generalizing from one figurine or group of figurines to all figurines in general. It is likely that many different reasons lay behind their manufacture and their usage.

This paper started by stating that it would draw its main archaeological evidence from the neolithic figurines of Crete and it therefore appears necessary to attempt a very tentative and hypothetical interpretative consideration of these figurines.

There appears to have been a well established 'stylistic' tradition for the plastic arts in neolithic Knossos—seen by the archaeologist in terms of posture and arm positions, etc., and small clay figurines were made within this tradition which depicted animals, male and female humans, and sexless humans. As well as humans with no striking anatomical features some were shown with apparent deformity and others with large protruding rumps. Some were thin and others fat; and some of each type were either clothed or tattooed.

On the basis of the suggested lines of investigation above (1–4), it is possible that the figurine material of Knossos may include figurines made for the following categories of reasons: those made by, and for, children to play with; others as some sort of initiation figures used as teaching devices to accompany songs or tales, and thrown away after use; still others as vehicles for sympathetic magic, carried and cared for by mothers desirous of offspring and kept in the house until the birth of a child.

The criteria that might be used for distinguishing such different figurine functions are:

For dolls: (1) the use of clay for the manufacture of the figurines; (2) the arm-stumps of the figurines; (3) the lack of any ritual context or signs of divinity on the figurines; (4) the size and portability of the figurines; (5) the non-conformist figures as well as the representations of animals.

For initiation figures: (1) the rare costly material as well as the common use of clay

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for the manufacture of the figurines; (2) the differences in technical achievement in the manufacture of the figurines; (3) the provenance of the figurines from habitation debris and rubbish areas as well as rarely from within houses; (4) the strikingly non-conformist figures as well as the representations of animals; (5) the lack of any signs of divinity on the figurines.

For vehicles of sympathetic magic: (1) either the sexless or the male and female figurines; (2) the provenance of the figurines from habitation debris and rubbish areas as well as occasionally from within houses; (3) the size and portability of the figurines.

Such an attempt at interpretation of the Cretan figurines, stresses the importance of their detailed re-examination and revaluation as well as the importance of the accurate recording of the archaeological context of the figures (the lack of detail regarding the position of the figurines in Egyptian pre-dynastic tombs and the missing information regarding the sex of the skeletons are cases in point), and it suggests the conclusion that although a Mother Goddess may have been worshipped in neolithic Crete, the prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines from Knossos do not appear to present any corroborative evidence of such a cult.

It has been seen that the generally accepted Mother Goddess interpretation gains no support from a consideration of the neolithic figurines from Crete in terms of (1) the figurines themselves, (2) the archaeological context of the figurines, (3) the later historical evidence, and (4) anthropological parallels. Before the existence of a prehistoric Mother Goddess is accepted on the basis of the neolithic and chalcolithic figurines of the ancient Near East and the Aegean, it is necessary to classify and re-examine all the figurines from each of these areas and from each specific culture, treating the figurines as objects whose significance cannot be determined before a comprehensive archaeological analysis has been completed.

Finally it is evident that the theoretical distinction between a deity of fertility and a general wish for children must be kept constantly to the fore. For, although there may possibly be some evidence for the wish for children in neolithic Crete expressed through the use of 'dolls' in sympathetic magic, there is no evidence for the existence of any deity connected with fertility.

LEGENDS TO TEXT-FIGURES[22]

FIGURE 1

1 [35] Lower part of male figure. Clay. Late Neolithic, Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, Excavation No. 232–60.)

2 [14] Squatting female figure with arm-stumps. Clay. Middle-Late (?) Neolithic. Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, No. 2718. After Evans 1921, Fig. 12, 3*a–c*.)

3 [63] Part of female figure. Clay. Middle Neolithic. Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, Excavation No. 77–59.)

4 [62] Part of sexless figure. Clay. Early Neolithic. Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, Excavation No. 84–59.)

5 [37] Standing sexless figure with no arms. Marble. Late Neolithic. Knossos. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, No. 1941.200.)

6 [95] Seated female figure with arms bent on to the chest, below the breasts, and with navel marked. Clay. Late (?) Neolithic. Knossos. (After Evans 1921, Fig. 13, 1A.)

7 [23] Standing sexless? figure with arm-stumps and shown with tattooing. Marble. Late Neolithic. Knossos. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, No. 1938.664.)

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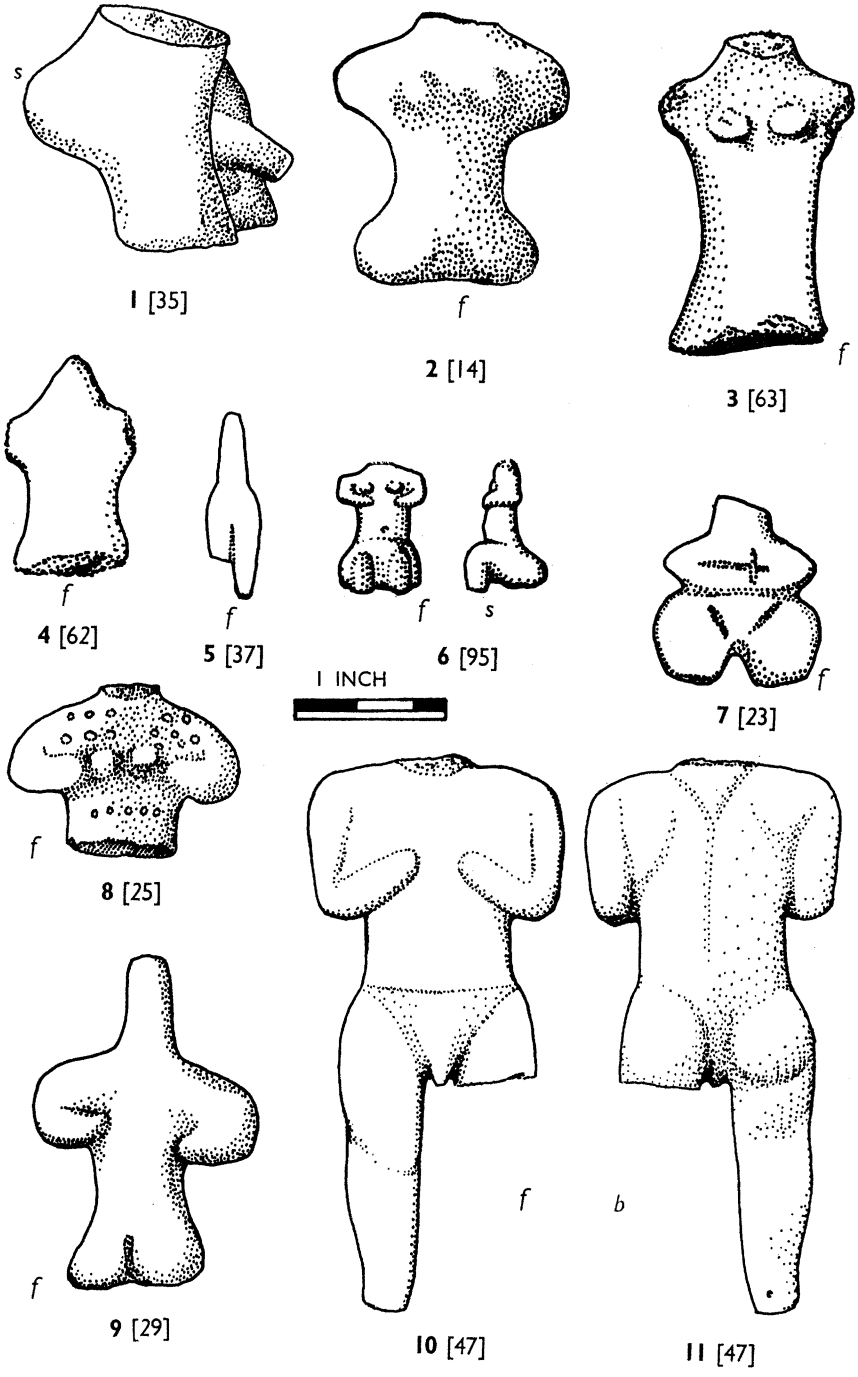

FIGURE 1. Figurines from Crete.

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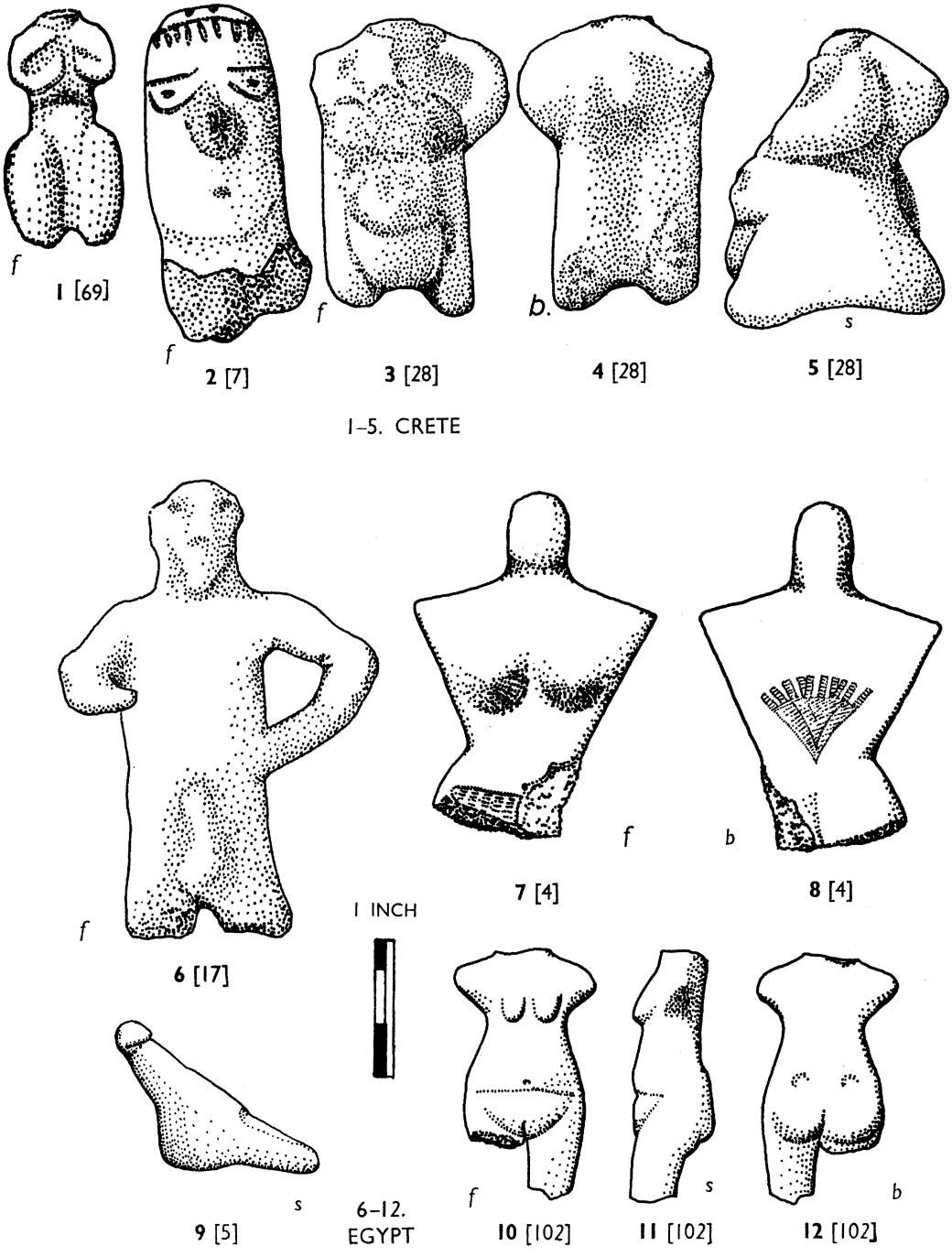

FIGURE 2. Figurines from Crete and Egypt.

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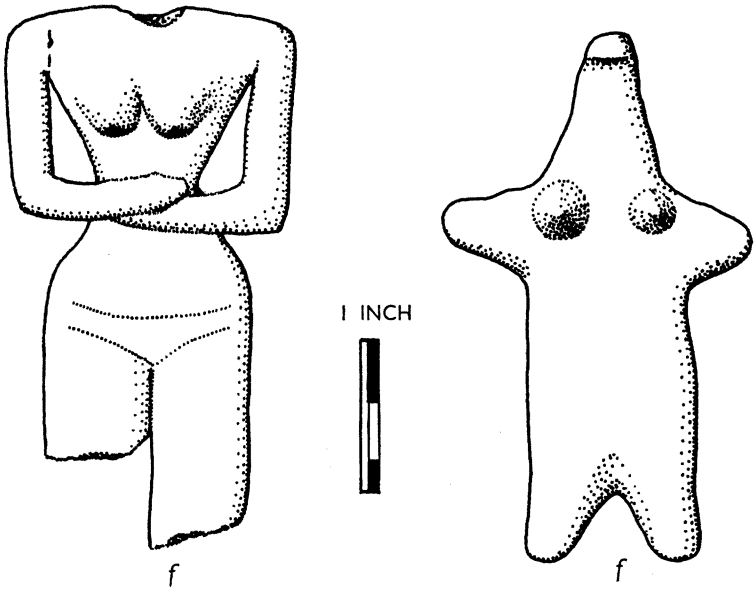

FIGURE 3. Figurines from Egypt.

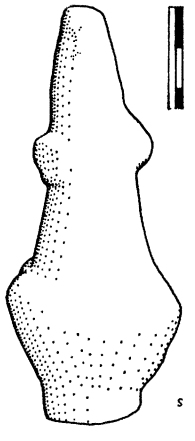

FIGURE 4. Figurine from Tsangli, Greece. [$\frac{3}{4}$]

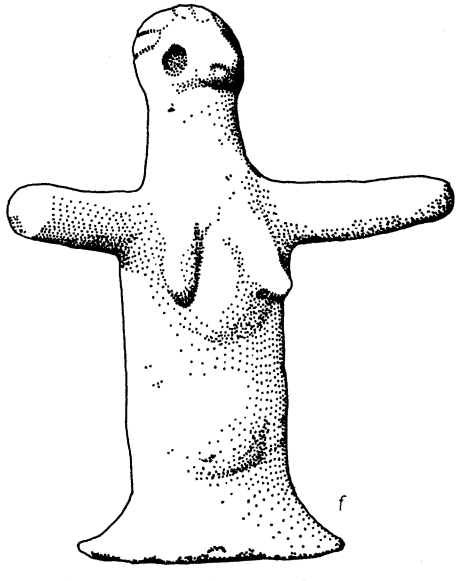

FIGURE 5. Figurine of the Sambaa tribe, East Africa.

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8 [25] Torso of female figure with arms bent on to the chest, at the side of the breasts, and marked with tattooing. Clay. Late Neolithic. Knossos. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, No. 1938.662.)
9 [29] Squatting sexless figure with arms bent on to the chest and with featureless head. Clay. Neolithic. Knossos. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, No. 1938.658.)
10, 11 [47] Standing male figure with arms bent on to the chest, and with backbone marked. Marble. Early Neolithic. Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, No. 2623.)

FIGURE 2
1 [69] Seated sexless figure with arms bent on to the chest. Marble. Late (?) Neolithic. Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, No. 100. After Hutchinson 1938, Plate 31, 4.)
2 [7] Head with facial features. Clay. Neolithic. Knossos. (Heraclion Museum, No. 2726. After Zervos 1956, Plate 61 and drawings by Evans.)
3–5 [28] Part of female hunchback (?). Clay. Neolithic. Knossos. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, No. 1938.659.)
6 [17] Part of male figure with modelled arms and head with facial features. Clay. Late Amratian (?). Grave U 96 from Hu. (Petrie Collection, London, No. 16796.)
7–8 [4] Torso of female figure with stump arms, featureless head, and with tattooing marked on the back and the navel indicated on the front. Clay. Pre-dynastic. Cemetery of Qau 100. (Petrie Collection, London, No. 9601.)
9 [5] Seated (?) sexless figure with featureless head and no arms. Clay. Pre-dynastic. Settlement of Badari, Area 3000. (Petrie Collection, London, No. 9647.)
10–12 [102] Part of female figure with stump arms, and with navel and lumbar dimples shown. Clay. Amratian (?). Settlement Area 3200 at Badari. (After Brunton & Thompson 1928, Plate LVIII, 5.)

FIGURE 3
1 [1] Standing female figure with arms crossed over the waist. Clay. Badarian. Grave 5227 at Badari. (British Museum, London, No. 59679. After Brunton & Thompson 1928, Plate XXV, 6 and 7.)
2 [28] Standing female figure with stump arms. Clay. Badarian. Settlement of Mostagedda. (British Museum, London, No. 62211. After Brunton 1937, Plate XXVI, 1.)

FIGURE 4
Rattle (?) in human form. Clay. Neolithic. Tsangli Stratum 5. Museum of Volos. (After Wace & Thompson 1912, Fig. 75, f.)

FIGURE 5
Figure of gossiping pregnant woman. Clay. From the Sambaa. (Collection of Hans Cory. After Cory 1951, No. 32.)

NOTES

[1] A bibliography can be found in Morss (1954).
[2] For an example of a modern hunting society where life is too hard to encourage the wish for many children and where many precautions to prevent the birth of children are taken, see Levi-Strauss (1948).
[3] It is interesting, however, that Evans himself originally rejected the Mother Goddess interpretation of figurines (Evans 1895). Even after he had found the first Cretan neolithic figurines Evans referred to them as 'so-called' idols (Bosanquet 1901). The amuletic theory was favoured by Hutchinson (1938).
[4] Evans (1901), where he published four figurines (or type-reconstuctions?); Evans (1921), where ten further examples were published; Evans (1927), where a further three can be found; Hutchinson (1938), where a further eleven unstratified examples were published; Weinberg (1951), who published a further example.
[5] Pernier (1935), who found one figure.
[6] Dunbabin (1944), who reported the finding of the figurine, and Weinberg (1951), who published it fully.
[7] Levi (1956–7), who found one figurine.
[8] Evans (1961), where five figurines were published. The author wishes to acknowledge his grateful thanks to Professor J. D. Evans for permission to use the unpublished figurines from the recent excavations at Knossos in this analysis.

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In fact this one surface find has been the mainstay of several recent studies which have variously deduced parallels between Crete and Greece (Weinberg 1951), Hacilar (Mellaart 1960), and the Canary Islands (Zeuner 1960).

[10] Some figures were published without descriptions (Zervos 1956), although they had previously been prepared for publication by Evans.

[11] It is necessary to note, however, that analysis of only those figurines found during the recent excavations at Knossos shows a significant correlation between the use of marble and the Early Neolithic period of Crete. For the purposes of this study, the attributions of Early, Middle, Late and Sub- Neolithic given by Sir Arthur Evans to the published and unpublished figurines have been followed, although they may well be suspect, especially those figurines which came from test pits.

[12] The burials at Skaphidhia, Katsambas, etc. will not be considered for, although apparently neolithic, their actual date is unknown, and they are too few for theoretical consideration.

[13] The only possible exception to this is the figurine from Phaistos which, according to many authors was found in a religious context. This opinion was based on the supposed association of the figurine with a piece of magnetic iron, various small dishes, and a shell of *pectunculus*, all of which were taken as religious in character (Mosso 1910).

[14] The ritual character of the tholoi at Arpachiya has been deduced from associated figurines as well as from associated burials (Mallowan 1956).

[15] An idea elaborated and cogently argued in the prepared report on the figurines from Jarmo (Broman 1958).

[16] Gombrich (1960) has clearly shown that what may appear stylized to one person may well appear realistic to another.

[17] For the difficulties inherent in such an approach, even when dealing with Mycenean material, see Jameson (1960).

[18] Although even this is unlikely, for Dr A. J. Arkell informs me that the ideas behind the 'shabti' figures did not exist before the Middle Kingdom and were the natural consequence of increasing divorce from the land and increasing urbanization.

[19] For some of the literature, see Meighan (1953) who, although one of the very few people to point out the folly of considering all the figurines in terms of one general concept, comes to the conclusion that prehistoric figurines should all be considered as dolls unless definite evidence to the contrary is forthcoming.

[20] Other examples are scattered through older anthropological reports such as Culwick (1935).

[21] A fairly full bibliography can be found in Morss (1954), who also gives examples of animal figurines among the American Indians which are left in special places to ensure the fertility of the herds.

[22] These drawings have been made especially for the publication of a Corpus of neolithic Cretan and pre-dynastic Egyptian figurines. The author wishes to express his grateful thanks to the two draughtsmen, Messrs Peter Pratt and Martin Weaver, for having carried out this enormous assignment in a way that does justice to the figures themselves. The numbering of the figures in square brackets refers to the Corpus numbers; the Cretan Corpus is to be published with the full excavation report of the recent excavations at Knossos. All the figures except Figures 1: 6 [95], 2: 10–12 [102] and 5, actual sizes of which are unknown, were drawn life-size and are published here with an inch and centimetre scale.

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